

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC

October 30, 2020

Thomas Fanning  
Chief Executive Officer  
Southern Company  
30 Ivan Allen Jr. Blvd. NW  
Atlanta, GA 30308

Dear Mr. Fanning:

We write to urge you to suspend all utility shutoffs until the COVID-19 public health emergency has ended. Because of the economic devastation wrought by the pandemic, millions of Americans are struggling to make ends meet and are at risk for having their electricity, water, and broadband services terminated. In order to effectively address the concurrent public health and economic crises, the families you serve must have uninterrupted access to these essential public services.

A staggering number of people – almost 179 million – are at risk of having their electricity shut off.<sup>1</sup> Electric and gas debts alone may reach as high as \$24.3 billion by the end of the year as many Americans, through no fault of their own, cannot afford to pay even the most essential of household bills.<sup>2</sup> Minority and low-income families who have disproportionately borne the brunt of the current economic crisis are particularly at risk for utility shutoffs.<sup>3</sup> Foreshadowing even greater hardship, shutoff moratoriums have expired (or were never implemented) in 33 states, and seven more states have moratoriums that will expire next month.<sup>4</sup> Every day more people in our communities become at risk for losing access to the water they need to wash their hands or the electricity they need to keep the lights on.

In addition, as millions of children are forced to learn remotely, the internet, like water and electricity, is an essential public service. The Constitution guarantees that every child has the opportunity to access public education. Because of the pandemic, the lack of a reliable internet connection deprives children of that right. Already, 14 percent of school-age children lack access to an internet connection at home.<sup>5</sup> Without a moratorium on electricity and broadband disconnections, many more children, in particular those in minority, low-income, and rural communities, are at risk of falling behind.<sup>6</sup>

We support legislation that would impose a federal moratorium on all utility shutoffs and provide federal government support to utilities for operations as well as customers, in light of declining utility revenues caused by unemployment, small business shutdowns, and rising poverty. In the meantime we ask that you proactively cease all shutoffs by your companies for nonpayment for families dealing with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/10/01/power-water-gas-bills/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://neada.org/covidarrearragespr/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/12/politics/utility-shutoffs-coronavirus/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://neada.org/utilityshutoffsuspensions/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://usafacts.org/articles/internet-access-students-at-home/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/a-national-crisis-as-coronavirus-forces-many-schools-online-this-fall-millions-of-disconnected-students-are-being-left-behind/2020/08/16/458b04e6-d7f8-11ea-9c3b-dfc394c03988\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/a-national-crisis-as-coronavirus-forces-many-schools-online-this-fall-millions-of-disconnected-students-are-being-left-behind/2020/08/16/458b04e6-d7f8-11ea-9c3b-dfc394c03988_story.html)

the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic until such time as the President lifts the National Emergency declaration and the states in which you operate have lifted state emergency declarations.

It is imperative that Congress have access to complete data on the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on utility services provision, in order to protect families and our children's future. Given the number of utility companies and patchwork of state regulations, collecting complete and accurate data is nearly impossible. Therefore, we ask that you provide the following data so we have a clear understanding of the problem, on a monthly basis, from January 1, 2020, to date by zip code and type of customer (residential, commercial, or industrial):

1. Total number of customers;
2. Number of service termination/disconnection notices issued to customers for nonpayment of bills;
3. Number of customers disconnected for nonpayment of bills;
4. Number of service restorations for customers disconnected for nonpayment of bills;
5. Number of customers that became eligible for disconnection due to nonpayment of bills but were not disconnected;
6. Average time in between service disconnection for nonpayment of bills and service restoration;
7. Number of customers in arrears;
8. Total dollar amount and average dollar amount in arrears;
9. Number of accounts and dollar values in arrears by age of arrears (30-60 days, 60-90 days, etc);
10. Average and median monthly bills and standard monthly usage;
11. Monthly total dollar amount of late fees collected;
12. Monthly number of customers that paid late fees;
13. Monthly average late fee charged per customer subject to fees; and
14. A description and utilization statistics on customer assistance programs.

Please confirm receipt of this communication and provide the expected date(s) of your outreach plan to Jan Singelmann with Senator Brown's office at [Jan\\_Singelmann@banking.senate.gov](mailto:Jan_Singelmann@banking.senate.gov) no later than November 13, 2020. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.


Sincerely,



Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senator



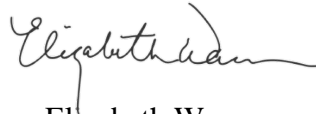
Ron Wyden  
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator



Tina Smith  
United States Senator